

Ochita Kuroi Yūsha no Densetsu:Volume 2 Chapter 1

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Chapter 1: A Flash of Red and White[edit]

It felt like he was looking at death.

Certain death.

As it was clear that he wouldn't be able to survive, it was pure black despair.

It was as if the death god's scythe was before them.

Those who saw that scythe cried out, were petrified, pleaded for help, begged for their life, and then finally gave up.

Because it was pointless to try and escape.

Because no matter where they ran, death would follow, and so everything was pointless because it was all over.

And so with certain death before them, everyone cried, called out, and then finally gave up.

But.

"....."

Despite the mighty death before him, a boy smiled.

The boy—Claugh Klom stared at the worst scene before him.

It was a large, enclosed room.

The children were being killed by a bird monster doused in fire.

One child's face twitched in fear, as they tried to scream.

But their voice wouldn't come out.

The fire monster flew into the child's mouth.

The child's body burned and then was annihilated. And again the bird flew.

And to the next child.

To the next child.

To the next child.

It was truly the scene of hell.

In a place where none could escape, the fire raven rampaged.

It rampaged with abnormal speed.

Claugh's thinking abilities weren't enough to come up with a plan to get through this situation at all.

However.

"... Now then, would it be best to slowly escape from that monster?"

The boy standing next to Claugh easily such a thing.

In response, Claugh looked to his side.

Unsurprisingly, there stood a boy his age.

White hair that suffered from a deficiency in pigmentation, and a clear, calm expression even amidst this hellish situation.

This boy named Luke Stokkart apparently had a plan to break through these circumstances.

And for that, he'd apparently chosen Claugh, who seemed to be the strongest one in the room.

"....."

Luke looked his way.

Looking back at him,

"So?"

After saying only that, Claugh again looked at the fire raven. He confirmed the current situation he was in.

As usual, the fire raven swooped down on the children and continued to kill them. With the number of children in the room having gone down considerably, it seemed that sooner or later, the fire raven's next target would be in this direction.

They were already out of time.

"Hurry up and tell me your plan."

With a nod, Luke—

"No, even if I called it a plan, it's not quite that much... uuum..."

After saying that, he stopped his words for some reason. Then he stared this way with a slightly troubled face, and said,

"... Come to think of it, I never asked for your name. What should I call you?"

To such a worthless question,

"Haa?"

Claugh said, instinctively frowning.

However, with a light-hearted expression, Luke said,

"No, even though I introduced myself, you haven't done so, and without that, this conversation is impolite..."

"That doesn't matter at aaaaaaaaaaaaaall! Are you an idiot? Wasting time right now with such a stupid..."

It was the instant Claugh said that.

The fire raven turned towards them.

No, more precisely, it seemed to turn towards Luke.

At that, Claugh clicked his tongue, and,

"Damn it! If it weren't for your pointless talk, the monster wouldn't have turned this way, see!?"

He shouted.

However, in response, Luke only knitted his eyebrows in some regret, and,

"Eh? Right now, it was clearly responding to the way you raised your voice, wasn't it?"

"Are you trying to pass the blame?"

"I'm only speaking the truth."

"It's a stupid truth."

"Ah, I like your way of speaking, just a bit. Or rather, a refreshing head is bad?"

"Are you trying to start a fight?"

"Ahaha. How so? Well, putting that aside, it's true that this isn't too good."

After saying that, Luke stared at the fire raven.

After killing yet another child, the fire raven looked as if it were going to move this way.

Its movements were abnormally fast.

It was so fast that even if it were Claugh, he'd only be able to dodge at the last moment.

At that.

"Now then,"

Saying that, he contemplated.

Then he looked to the brat beside him who was putting on airs.

Can this guy dodge the fire raven's attacks?

Though he inwardly muttered that, Luke spoke as if seeing straight through him.

"I wouldn't be able to dodge it at all?"

"Aan? I didn't say anything, you know."

"But you were thinking it, correct? *This guy's going to be a burden, isn't he? Like I thought, I shouldn't give him a hand? What point is there in helping him out?* You were thinking something along those lines, correct?"

At the question,

"....."

Claugh didn't answer.

Because he was thinking exactly that.

Luke smiled. In this hellish place, he smiled cheerfully.

"It's all right. You'll think afterwards that there was great merit in helping me. Now then, protect me. With all your strength, put your life on the line to protect me. And if you do, I'll overcome this situation."

He said such things with a face overflowing with confidence.

Already, he was becoming increasingly agitated.

Dealing with this brat's frivolous tone that was clearly like that of an expert con man's, possibly throwing away his life if he were to fight or try to escape—it was a foolish situation.

No, from the beginning, everything that was happening here was foolish.

No matter where you escaped to, death was raging.

And the children who'd been forcibly taken here were crying out and trying to escape.

No, several of them, with resigned expressions, were just sitting on the floor.

This was the general reaction of those with death just before them.

Amidst that, Luke spoke.

With his inferior physical capabilities compared to the other children gathered in this room, the brat who should be the closest to death spoke with a calm expression.

"If you protect me, I'll overcome this situation."

At that,

"Ah, damn it, looks like I've gotten involved with a huge braggart."

While saying that, Clauth laughed.

In a situation where they might only be seconds away from death, Clauth seemed to laugh cheerfully.

No, he truly was cheerful.

Right now, with death certainly before him, Clauth felt this way for the first time since he'd been born. And regarding that, just a little, *this isn't good, huh?* he thought. Because he could never understand why he existed, because he couldn't see a reason in spending day after day being beaten by his mother, with death looming before him—in this impending situation where it was necessary to find a solution, he was feeling just a bit satisfied.

There aren't many things as amusing as this, are there?

He thought about such things.

Then,

"All right, let's do this,"

He said, to which Luke nodded and then,

"But before that, please tell me your name,"

He asked for that kind of thing.

In response, with a fed up expression, Claugh—

"You're still saying that? That doesn't matter."

"But I think it does. If we ever need to address each other, it'll be inconvenient not to know each other's name. Well, in that case, if you don't want to introduce yourself, may I call you whatever I want?"

At that, with a "sure", Claugh nodded noncommittally.

Luke made a somewhat thoughtful expression.

"All~ right. That's how it is. What would be good? Ah! Since you have red hair, how about Baby^[1]..."

"What the hell is that!?"

"Yes, yes, Baby, don't get so angr..."

"Shut uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuup! You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

Claugh said, at which Luke had a face that said that that was obvious, before Claugh then addressed an annoying matter:

"Ah, geez, it's Claugh! Claugh Klom!? Are you happy now!?"

At that, with a satisfied smile, Luke said,

"Yes. I'm happy. With this, I'll remember the name of the hero who dies saving me."

"I die!?"

Claugh yelled, to which Luke laughed.

"Exactly? Well, that aside, I'll be counting on you to do your best, Claugh."

He said, and then.

The fire raven flew towards them.

At that, Luke—

"Yes, yes, now quickly save me!"

"This guy seriously needs to shut uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuup!?"

While exclaiming that, Claugh grabbed the arm of Luke, who was clearly too slow to be able to dodge the fire raven.

He pulled.

In that instant.

The fire raven flew past the side of Luke's head, with just a paper-thin distance between them.

Despite that, Luke calmly smiled, and,

"Oh~, that was really close. As I thought, I didn't make a mistake in choosing you, Claugh."

As he said such a thing, the fire raven changed directions and again moved to attack Luke.

However, Luke wasn't looking at that anymore. Rather than at the fire raven, he was staring at somewhere else in the room, before looking up at the ceiling, and then he looked at the ground.

He seemed that he was searching for something.

At that,

"What are you looking for?"

He asked.

Without looking at him, Luke spoke.

"Something good."

"And what's 'something good'?"

"Something good is something good."

"Huh. Then, if you find that good thing, something good will happen?"

In response, still without looking at him,

"That aside, it's fun looking..."

Luke began to say, when Claugh kicked his head and sent him flying.

"Gya—"

While screaming, Luke was blown off to the right.

From right behind him, the fire raven against slipped past Luke, and while trying to attack him, it noticed different children, and flew over to them instead.



Again someone died.

Again someone died.

While grimacing at that,

"Stop moving so sluggishly and hurry up and find a way to end this! Right now, two people died in your place!"

Claugh yelled, and then ran.

For the sake of protecting Luke, who was paying no attention to the fire raven.

Luke was clearly searching for something as he looked around the room. He was frantically trying to find something.

However, just what exactly, Claugh didn't know.

During that time, children died.

Children died.

Once there were no other children left, they wouldn't be able to escape the fire raven's attack.

That was why victory had to be achieved before there were no children remaining.

Claugh looked around the room.

He was affirming the number of children left.

"....."

He wanted to clutch his head at the room's circumstances.

There were once over a hundred children here, but now, as far as he could see, about twenty children remained. And even now, that number was quickly going down.

There wasn't any more time.

There clearly wasn't any more time.

Thus, while running, he asked,

"Hey, Luke. Have you found a solution to this yet?"

Unsurprisingly, without looking his way, Luke—

"Almost."

"What do you mean, 'almost!?' Hurry up and find something already!"

He exclaimed, grabbing Luke's collar. Like that, he continued running. So that they wouldn't become the fire raven's target, he began running to where there were as many children as possible.

But then Luke said,

"No, Claugh, not that way. Go to seven o' clock."

At those sudden words,

"Aan!? Seven o' clock behind?"

Claugh turned his head.

And again, he frowned.

After all, there were only three children in that direction.

If they were to go there, it was possible that they wouldn't be able to avoid the fire raven's attack.

It was possible that they'd die easily.

Therefore, Claugh said,

"Seven o' clock won't work."

"But it has to be seven o' clock."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

"Ah, geez, it can't be helped, huh?"

While saying that, Claugh stopped. He turned on his heel. Then, in the direction where death might be awaiting them, he began to run.

"So, where to?"

Claugh asked, to which Luke answered,

"To the wall at the back."

"The wall?"

Asking that back, Claugh looked up at the wall ahead of him. It was a gigantic wall with magic circles drawn all over it. Looking at that,

"Are you gonna tamper with a magic circle to make an exit appear?"

Claugh posed that question, at which Luke struck his hand as if to say *you really don't know anything*.

"Wrong."

"Wrong!?"

"Wrong, yes. First, I can't read the organization of the magic circles drawn here at all. Can you read them, Claugh?"

As he was asked that, Claugh looked at the magic circles drawn within the room. Then, in his head, he went over the knowledge he'd attained from the piles of books in the living room of the house he'd grown up with his mother.

But even if he dug within that knowledge, no images that matched the complex magic circles drawn here arose.

That was why Claugh shook his head.

"I can't read them either. It looks like what's drawn here has a pretty different structure from normal magic's organization, huh?"

As he stated that, Luke, whom he was dragging across the floor, suddenly made a surprised face as he looked up at him.

"Oh? Judging from that statement just now, you can use magic at your age, Claugh? If you can use offensive magic, Claugh, that changes my plan considerably."

However, Claugh shook his head at that as well.

"No, I can't use it? I know about it because I've read about it in books. What about you, can you use it?"

Luke proudly said,

"Of course I can't!"

"Don't say that while sticking out your chest. However, your movements are slow, and you're saying you can't use magic—you're a really useless guy, aren't you?"

Claugh said, to which Luke laughed.

"I really am. But if you're thought of as a happy-go-lucky failure who's incompetent at everything, you're placed in this room... Well, all of it is going according to plan."

Then, Claugh arrived just in front of the wall.

Luke casually stood up. Then, shaking off Claugh's hand, he looked up at the wall. He knocked on it a few times. He folded his arms, appearing to be deep in thought. *Where would be good*, he muttered.

After watching that, Claugh stopped looking at Luke. At any rate, as it seemed that he was starting on his plan, Claugh stood watch for the fire raven.

In the center of the room, the fire raven was rampaging as per usual.

And as it did so, the number of children went down. Already, there was only a small number of children left.

But the rate at which it was killing children was clearly slowing down. From the looks of it, it seemed that the fire raven were fed by the people it burned. Nevertheless, as Claugh was still slower than its movements, things wouldn't last for very long.

There, the fastest child was killed. Then there was only one child remaining there—one prey left, and then that final person was scorched away.

With this, complete annihilation.

The only ones left were Luke, Claugh, and the three children nearby.

Then suddenly.

"....."

The fire raven flew towards them in search of its remaining spoils.

And Claugh's red eyes met the same, burning red eyes of the fire raven. When that happened, the bird's body arranged itself into a posture that indicated that it was going to attack here.

At that, Claugh spoke.

"... Hey, Luke."

"Yes?"

"Are things going well?"

"Ye~s. Almost done. You?"

"... Who knows? Well, things are getting pretty dangerous here..."

He said, looking at Luke, who was holding two narrow stakes that he'd gotten from who-knows-where, which he stuck into the wall composed of stones, before taking off his coat and quickly fastening it to them.

Watching that,

"But, well, if you finish playing house in less than two minutes, I'll go and earn a little income..."

As Claugh said that, the fire raven flew towards him.

As expected, it was quick.

Abnormally quick.

Looking at that,

"Ah, like I thought, this isn't good. One minute! Do something within that one minute!"

While yelling, he lowered his entire body like a coiled spring, before releasing.

He sprung to the left.

The fire raven chased him.

Just as it was about to catch up, he kicked the wall to change direction.

The fire raven then reacted to that.

"Damn it, there are still three other kids, so why me!?"

While exclaiming that, he dropped to the ground.

However, the bird stubbornly continued to follow him.

Claugh dodged.

Dodged.

Dodged...

"Shit,"

At being attacked three times, Claugh grimaced.

He wouldn't be able to dodge the next attack. He understood that. Its movements were clearly too fast. He wouldn't be able to avoid it unscathed forever.

In other words, the next attack would kill him.

At that,

"Ah, geez, this damn biiird!"

Claugh yelled, before taking one of his shoes off and holding it in his hand.

And.

"Die!"

He threw the shoe at part of the face of the bird that was just before him.

Then that part of the fire raven's face turned to smoke and appeared to disperse.

"Uoh, is that effective...?"

Claugh began, but then, instead of dispersing, it was immediately restored, as it glared in his direction. It moved to attack.

"Not effective ataaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaall!"

He ran away from there.

"Isn't it unfair that the laws of nature don't work against it? Then, what to do? Magic? Could magic be effective? In that case..."

He again recalled the information he'd gained from the books, stored in the house he'd grown up in with his mother.

The description of the spell called **Misumi** that produced water.

How to use it.

How to invoke it.

How to draw the magic circle.

He remembered skimming through that information two years ago.

But as he'd never thought in those days that he'd be attacked by a fire monster, he hadn't read through it carefully, not to mention that **Misumi** wasn't a simple spell to begin with or the fact that Claugh hadn't learned the foundation of magic, as he never thought that he would have a reason to.

That was why he definitely wouldn't be able to use it.

Even if he knew how to draw the magic circle and how to invoke it, there was no way he would be able to use it.

He wouldn't be able to use it, but,

"Unless I use it, I'm gonna die, aren't I—!?"

While exclaiming that, he began to draw the magic circle.

He focused his consciousness at his fingertip.

The purpose of the magic circle, rearranging the placement of the **seirei**, was so that he could create light that would have the outside world follow his consciousness, according to what was written in the books—anyhow, he tried to do just that.

He worked hard to have light gather at his fingertip.

Now, concentrate.

Concentrate, me!

And he shifted all the nerves in his body to his fingertip.

"....."

There, his hand was a bit unresponsive.

Brimming at his fingertip, he could feel something.

At his fingertip, power was gathering...

There, he looked at his finger.

He looked at the tip of his finger.

And he spoke.

"Seriously, it's not light ataaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaall!?"

While shouting, he jumped to the left.

The fire raven moved to cut through his side. However, this time, he could no longer avoid it. His right shoulder was burned, as violent pain raced through it. For a moment, he blacked out from the pain.

"Gua—"

While raising his voice in pain, his posture crumbled. With a jerk, his knees collapsed from beneath him, and he fell to the ground.

Nevertheless, he didn't stop.

After rolling across the ground, he stood up and lifted his head. He began to run again.

By that point, there were no longer any surviving children other than Claugh and Luke.

They'd all been killed.

Regarding the children's bodies, there weren't any left whatsoever. As they'd been burned to nothing and utterly destroyed, there were no corpses remaining.

And now, it was Claugh and Luke's turn.

The bird danced in the air.

Reacting to that, Claugh tried to move one more time.

"... Uah—"

With sharp pain running through his right shoulder, his body couldn't move very well. Because of that, he looked at his shoulder. The skin's surface had become jet black. It was badly burned. Thanks to the pain, he couldn't move properly. If his arm moved at all, his balance would collapse. In this situation, he couldn't keep pace with the fire raven's speed anymore.

In other words.

"... Looks like I've lost."

In other words, there was nothing more that could be done.

The laws of nature weren't effective.

He couldn't use magic.

Furthermore, his arm couldn't move; all he could do was talk.

That was why,

"Hey, Luke. What have you been doing all this time?"

Claugh asked that.

Though he'd said he would wait for a minute, there was no longer any point in that at all.

Claugh would be killed, and then that blockhead Luke would immediately be killed as well, and so it would end.

But in response.

Luke finally looked his way. On his face, his usual smile of putting on airs arose.

He spoke.

"Oh, do you want help?"

"As if. Like I'd wanna be saved by you."

Claugh said, to which Luke laughed again. It seemed that he'd completed his task one way or another.

"Then, everything's going to plan?"

Claugh asked, to which Luke nodded.

"Of course. From the start to up until now, my plan's been moving along well."

At those words, Claughed stared at the typical clear, calm expression of Luke's.

Then he looked behind him.

Over there, for whatever reason, were two stakes driven into the wall, with Luke's coat tied around one.

He had no idea what they're for, but it looked like they were a part of that guy's plan.

"So, what now?"

At the same time Claugh asked that, the bird again started its attack.

It intended to kill the two who'd survived until the end.

And this time, its target wasn't Claugh.

The bird moved.

Towards Luke.

Claugh was idly staring at that. There was nothing he could do anymore, as with his right arm the way it was, he couldn't even protect himself.

That was why he spoke.

"If you die, I'm gonna laugh."

Luke also laughed, and,

"I'm not going to die."

After saying that, he grabbed the item of clothing tied around one of the stakes behind him. And he tied the cloth around the other stake. As if creating a bridge between the two stakes, he tied the coat between them.

That was the only thing he did.

But with only that, the room's situation suddenly changed.

All of a sudden, the magic circles that covered the room shone with intense light, as a high-pitched sound started to tear through one's ears.

Immediately surprised at that,

"Uo—"

Claugh moaned.

Following that, as if being absorbed by the magic circles, the fire raven's form began to disperse.

The rampaging fire raven's body rapidly became smaller, until finally it vanished.

As the fire raven disappeared, the light of the magic circles disappeared with it.

"....."

Silence returned once more to the room.

The painful sound emitted by the magic circles and the noise of children screaming could no longer be heard.

It was over.

Luke's plan was a success, and they'd managed to survive.

Regarding that.

"....."

Claugh narrowed his eyes.

He looked around in the room that had nobody left, and then looked at the wall with the two stakes driven in it and the tied coat.

And.

"....."

He looked towards Luke, and his unsurprisingly calm and gentle expression.

Noticing his gaze,

"Well? Aren't you glad you went along with my plan?"

Luke smiled with an innocent face.

However, to that,

"....."

Claugh didn't respond.

Without saying anything, he gathered power in his entire body. He sharpened his consciousness.

To prepare for the next development.

To prepare for the next attack.

For the next enemy—

"....."

To prepare for the next attack from this supposedly incompetent, frivolously laughing Luke Stokkart.

At that, Luke tilted his head to one side in a curious manner.

"What's wrong?"

"....."

However, unsurprisingly, Claugh didn't answer.

His thoughts whirling, he was confirming the situation left behind right now.

Why had they been put into this kind of room?

This, judging by the words of the one who brought Claugh here, Rei Stokkart, had been expected.

What Rei told Claugh was this.

- *All of the children in this test site, like Claugh, have undergone treatment.*

- *The chances that you won't be accepted are zero.*

- *If you're able to survive, she, Rei Stokkart, will become your teacher.*

Those three factors led to these conclusions.

As this test site was where Rei carried out human experiments, those who were able to accept the fire raven were, from then on, able to live for Rei's experiment.

In other words, this room had been made such that if one couldn't survive taking in the fire raven, they couldn't escape from here.

They should be able to ensure that there wouldn't suddenly be a kid who could easily discover a way to get rid of the fire raven.

Despite that.

"....."

Luke got rid of that fire raven.

It seemed that he entirely knew of a way to get rid of the fire raven.

But why did that guy know that?

How did he find a way to get rid of that fire raven?

There were three possibilities.

First:

This annoying brat called Luke Stokkart was truly a genius and suddenly came up with the way to escape.

Second:

This annoying brat who possessed the same surname as Rei Stokkart was a spy sent by the **Emirel Private Forces** who was here to ensure that this experiment was completed.

If he had to choose one of those two possibilities,

"The latter, huh?"

Claugh muttered, to which Luke again had a curious expression, and,

"Eh? The latter? What are you talking about?"

He said, but as expected, Claugh didn't reply.

Instead, he remembered the words Luke had said earlier.

This was what he said.

"First, I can't read the organization of the magic circles drawn here at all. Can you read them, Claugh?"

Idiot.

Someone uninformed got rid of the fire raven by tampering with magic circles?

In other words, he'd been lying.

He'd read about the magic circles drawn here. On top of that, he understood the contents of these obviously complex magic circles that were different from normal ones.

In other words, he was something like one of the staff behind this test site.

But if that was the case.

If he was a member of the **Emirel Private Forces**,

"Why did you save me?"

Claugh asked.

Again, Luke made a surprised face.

"Like I told you..."

However, Claugh interrupted and spoke.

"Don't play dumb. Since you understand these complex magic circles, you're one of the staff behind this experiment, aren't you? You were here to observe this experiment that brought forth the fire raven, right? And all of the children here were failures. I'm the only one left. If I'd been burned to death by that fire raven, this experiment would be complete. Despite that, for some reason you got rid of the fire raven before it killed me. Why the hell..."

He began, but then he stopped.

As he then realized the reason why Luke had spared him.

No, it wasn't that Luke spared him. There was nothing to gain from that.

Claugh thought back to when the fire raven disappeared.

Back then, the bird's target hadn't been Claugh, but rather, Luke. That was why he got rid of it. If the bird had targetted not him, but Claugh, then he wouldn't have made it disappear.

Essentially, in this place, this guy was to observe that the children were able to take in the fire raven, but if the danger extended to himself, he was able to get rid of the fire raven.

Then, with this, the experiment was now over.

Then that means...

But then Luke smiled, and,

"That's a good line of thought, but it's only about sixty percent correct. Though I admit that I was mostly aware of the structure of the magic circles drawn here and used for the experiment, I'm no longer a member of the **Emirel Private Forces** by this point."

He said that.

Claugh glared at Luke in response.

"What do you mean, you're not a member?"

"I mean that I'm a traitor?"

"Hoh. A traitor, huh? Then if you're a traitor, I guess there's nothing more to ask, is there?"

While saying that, Claugh didn't release any of the strength in his body. Staring straight at Luke, he gave him a sharp look.

At that, Luke knit his brow in a troubled manner.

"Uwa, what amazing killing intent. Even though you can barely move on top of that, your gaze isn't wavering at all. Despite that it wouldn't be strange to let your guard down once the fire raven monster disappeared, you began to suspect me immediately after? That's just a bit troubling. This is my mistake. The person I asked to be my protector wasn't supposed to be this competent..."

With those words, Claugh could see Luke had been trying to do.

That is, he was a member of the **Emirel Private Forces** from the beginning. However, that was an act, and he was plotting to escape using the structure of the magic circles in this room or something like that—

Then Claugh again recalled Luke's earlier words.

Claugh had said, "*Your movements are slow, and you're saying you can't use magic—you're a really useless guy, aren't you?*"

He remembered what Luke had said in reply back then.

"I really am. But if you're thought of as a happy-go-lucky failure who's incompetent at everything, you're placed in this room... Well, all of it is going according to plan."

Right.

All had gone according to plan.

From the beginning, he'd penetrated into the **Emirel Private Forces** as a member and worked on this testing site.

And then he'd made himself look incompetent, and so was sent here to be disposed of. He was sent to this test site with an abnormally high mortality rate, but whose structure he already knew how to unravel for the sake of escaping.

It was a fairly elaborate, well-thought out plan that he'd polished well.

"In other words, you're gonna betray the **Emirel Private Forces** and escape to the outside?"

Claugh asked, to which Luke nodded.

"Well, something like that."

"On top of that, so that you wouldn't have any pursuers, you intended to have everyone who knew you vanished disappear. Specifically, you intended to have the fire raven kill everyone and then escape."

At that, Luke's expression became somewhat remorseful.

"If I could, I would've liked to save everyone, but right now, my power isn't enough for that. After all, even if everyone were to escape, we'd immediately be killed by pursuers, right?"

As he said that, his expression truly was remorseful. He truly wanted to save everyone, but it seemed that he was chagrinned over his inability to do so.

But.

"....."

So what?

Claugh thought.

This guy made the correct choice.

If a way to save everyone existed, then that would be the correct choice. But it wasn't necessary to let himself die because that wasn't possible.

If a way to save himself existed, then he should do it.

That was why the problem right now was how he intended to escape from here.

Claugh glared at Luke and continued.

"But if that's the case, then you weren't able to get rid of the fire raven until it killed all the children who could potentially be a witness. In other words, until everyone else had been killed, you had to survive. How cold-hearted. How cold-hearted to stand around while that monster killed everyone else. And so that you could be protected, it was necessary to have a single idiot as your partner."

"If he really was an idiot, then things would be better off."

However, Claugh ignored that.

"So, you chose me. With me backing you up, you waited until everyone had been killed. And, at the very end, after the fire raven had killed me as well, you'd casually invoke the magic circle... That was your plan..."

"Not everything went as I'd hoped, though."

Luke again smiled in a troubled manner.

But Claugh didn't smile.

Rather, his entire body became tense.

The situation was, unsurprisingly, extraordinarily bad.

He remembered his conversation with Luke one more time.

What Luke had asked.

"Oh? Judging from that statement just now, you can use magic at your age, Claugh? If you can use offensive magic, Claugh, that changes my plan considerably."

That guy had asked that.

However, what was the point of that question?

If he knew of a way to get rid of the fire raven, what point was there in confirming whether Claugh could use magic or not?

Claugh stared at Luke.

And then he asked,

"Bastard... you use magic, don't you?"

At that,

"Didn't I tell you otherwise before? I don't use it,"

While saying that, contrary to his words, his finger began to dance through the air.

What he was doing was already clear.

It was magic.

He was using magic.

Furthermore, it was magic for the sake of killing Claugh.

Magic for the sake of killing the final witness who knew that Luke survived.

But.

"Like I'd let you!"

Claugh yelled as he ran.

However, Luke didn't move at all. He indifferently drew a magic circle with the light at his fingertip.

"It's futile, Claugh. The reason I so easily got rid of the fire raven was because I concluded that, with your injured right arm, you weren't a threat to me. Well, if possible, I didn't want to do this directly... though it's selfish to talk about escaping alone without staining my own hands, isn't it... and so—"

There, he completed his magic circle.

What it was the magic circle for and what the invocation was, he didn't know. But it was undoubtedly magic meant to kill Claugh.

And Luke spoke.

"And so, please die."

After saying that, he pointed at him.

He chanted the spell.

"WHAT I SEEK IS BURNING FIELDS >>> KURENAI!"

In that instant.

From the magic circle Luke constructed, numerous fire bullets were released, attacking Claugh.

He dodged one.

He dodged another one.

He dodged another one, and then one struck his right arm that had already lost all feeling.

Furthermore, one hit his left arm as he wasn't able to dodge.

"Gua—"

Claugh grimaced in intense pain.

With this, his left arm couldn't move either.

His chances of victory were again being destroyed.

But he didn't stop.

He ran straight towards Luke.

While moving away to escape that,

"Not even stopping after that—you honestly are a bit frightening. Well, either way, it'll end with the next one,"

Luke said, after which he began to draw another magic circle.

Before that magic circle was completed, it was necessary to reach Luke.

He no longer had the strength to dodge the next spell. If the next spell hit him, he would die.

That was why, no matter what it took, he had to catch up with Luke before the next spell, and end his life...

"....."

However, that seemed impossible.

Claugh realized that Luke's movements were faster than his. With his injuries, he likely wouldn't be able to chase him.

Furthermore, it seemed that his new magic circle was already finished.

Looking at that.

Looking at that,

"....."

Claugh stopped moving.

And quietly,

"Ah, this is useless,"

He muttered.

At that, Luke stopped his hand at his completed magic circle.

"Ah, are you surrendering?"

Claugh simply nodded at that.

"Yeah. It's your victory. Looks like it's impossible for me to win in this situation, huh?"

After saying that, he let his arms that could no longer move dangle at his side.

Luke's expression clouded up at that, and,

"... I really didn't want this,"

He said such a thing.

But Claugh shrugged.

"It's fine. Or better said, you're not in the wrong, you know? At any rate, if it weren't for you, I'd have been killed by that bird monster immediately."

"... I'm sorry."

"I said, you don't have to apologize."

After saying that, Claugh took in a small breath, and then let it out.

And he contemplated.

Growing up with being continuously beaten by his mother.

Now that he'd finally left all that, he was already going to die?

Well, at least I managed to find some amusement in the end, huh? He thought about such things.

Then those words echoed in his head once more. The words of his drug-addicted, insane mother echoed.

—*You're special, after all.*

—*A special child, after all.*

But regarding that, Claugh looked at Luke and smiled wryly. He wasn't necessarily more advanced for his age than Claugh, and furthermore his physical capabilities also weren't very high, but he'd exhausted all of his plans and in the end had driven Claugh into a corner like this.

If it were this guy before him,

"It looks like I'm not that special, Mom,"

Claughed muttered while smiling wryly.

Nevertheless, his mother's words echoed in his head.

—*You're special, after all.*

—*A special child, after all, so live, live, keep living, and...*

Get revenge against this rotten world.

At that.

"....."

Claugh closed his eyes.

Looking at that, Luke again said in an apologetic tone,

"... If you don't try and avoid it, it won't hurt."

After saying that, the magic circle he'd drawn disappeared. And he began drawing a different one.

Perhaps it was magic that could kill Claugh in one blow and give him a painless death.

Izuchi, or Kuuri.

He opened his eyes.

Luke's magic circle was complete.

Looking at that.

Claugh spoke.

"Hey, Luke."

Luke looked at him and said,

"What is it?"

"The thing is, I want you to listen to my last proposal just for a bit."

"Proposal?"

"Yeah."

Claugh nodded.

During those moments, those words wrapped themselves around in his mind.

—*You're special.*

—*You're special.*

"What's your proposal?"

"Well, you seeee, if something like begging for my life would be shameful and no good here, would it be possible to integrate me into your escape plan?"

"....."

"See, if it's two people escaping, there wouldn't be any pursuers either, so there shouldn't be a problem."

"....."

"Yeah, it wouldn't work if a hundred people tried to escape, but if it's only you and me—two people—then we wouldn't be noticed by pursuers, or at least that's what I think... Is it no good?"

"....."

However, there was no answer.

Claugh shrugged at that, and,

"Ah, so it really is no good? Then at this point..."

Luke nodded.

"Yes. There's an obstacle in place to permit no more than one to escape, so any more..."

There, Claugh shook his head to indicate that no more explanation was needed.

As Luke had only meant for himself to escape, he couldn't prepare for any more than one person to run away.

This guy had a pointlessly sad expression that said if he could've prepared for a hundred people, then a hundred people would escape.

But that wouldn't work.

Even if someone with a sharp mind like him had the time to prepare, it took him everything he had just for him to be able to escape.

Regarding that, Claugh looked up at the wide ceiling.

"I see. Like I thought, this really is an elaborate place, huh? Then, it's impossible for the both of us to escape together."

"I'm sorry."

"No, no, like I said, you don't need to apologize. If it's impossible, then that's how it is, isn't it?"

"....."

Nevertheless, Luke wore a pained expression as if he were about to cry.

No, he might truly feel that way from the bottom of his heart. While watching the children in this room die, he might be blaming himself like a fool.

Because my power isn't enough, I can't save anyone.

Because my power isn't enough, I can't change anything.

But.

"Why do you want to escape so badly?"

Claugh asked, to which Luke only smiled sadly and said nothing.

It seemed that there was something he had to do, no matter what.

It seemed that there was something he had to escape for at all cost.

And to that,

"But unfortunately, it has nothing to do with me, huh?"

Claugh said.

At that, Luke again—

"I'm sorry,"

He apologized, at which Claugh smiled.

"Liiike I said, stop apologizing. Since there's apparently something you gotta do no matter what, it can't be helped."

"....."

"So, we're both trying to do what we can to avoid death. That's why I asked if there was a way so that both of us could survive, but you said that there isn't. Now then. So, what to do?"

At that, Luke lifted his finger. He completed his magic circle. And,

"Please die,"

He said with a sad expression.

Claugh stared at that magic circle, and,

"Looks like it. If it's to grant your wish, there's no other option, huh?"

"....."

"But then what should be done to grant *my* wish? I need to survive too. Even if it means sacrificing your life. Because I vowed to struggle, to squirm, and somehow survive, in order to kill him... to kill that idiot noble called Emirel... That's why I need to survive too. That's why I'm gonna apologize too..."

Is it fine if I disregard your life?"

At Claugh's words.

With a surprised face,

"Eh?"

Luke leaked such a voice.

Then he immediately understood what Claugh meant, as his expression changed.

"I-It can't be,"

He murmured.

But it was already too late.

Luke had made a big mistake.

Right now, the place Claugh was at.

A wall covered in magic circles.

In that wall, two stakes had been driven in, and as if connecting the two stakes, Luke's coat was tied between them.

And from the beginning, Claugh had been moving towards this place. Even if, as his left shoulder had been hit by the **Homura** Luke released, he couldn't move his arm, he'd calculated that he could approach this place before Luke, and so moved for that sake.

For just what reason?

There, for the first time, Luke made a trembling expression, and,

"D-Don't be absurd! If you do that, both of us will die!"

He cried out.

Right. Claugh was going to do something as absurd as this. If the clothing connecting the two stakes were to be removed, the fire raven would be born once more.

And this time there would be no escape.

The fire raven would enter his body, and like that, his body would be accepted. Rei Stokkart's experiment would come to a complete end.

Luke spoke.

"Stop acting like a fool. Already, over three thousand people were sacrificed for this experiment..."

He began, but Claugh laughed at that.

"What? Only three thousand? Then, my turn might go well."

"That's impossible."

"You don't know if it's impossible until you try, you know? Anyhow, I'm special."

After saying that, Claugh grabbed the cloth tied between the two stakes with his mouth, and then pulled.

"Stop!"

Crying out, Luke moved to chant his spell.

In order to kill Claugh.

In order to stop the fire raven from being reborn.

But already, he was too late.

Claugh smiled. And then he pulled Luke's coat apart from the stakes. Furthermore, he then quickly threw it away with all the strength he had.

In that instant, again the magic circles within the room began to glow.

The room's temperature went up a few degrees.

In the center of the room, fire began to gather.

At that,

"Damn it!"

Luke cried, stopping his magic, before running over this way. Again, in order to stop the fire raven.

At the same time, Claugh began to run. In order to receive the fire raven.

And already, the two of them understood.

If Claugh failed to absorb the fire raven, Luke would be killed.

Luke had to arrive at the wall, pick up the coat, and then tie it once more to the stakes before the fire raven could go after him. Before it could kill him. The time Luke had spent preparing this plan had all come to nothing.

Thus, while running, Claugh spoke.

"Just in case I happen to die... sorry."

In response, Luke looked at him while running, and with an astounded expression,

"What do you mean, 'just in case'!? Ten thousand times, ten thousand deaths, honestly! Good grief, I can't believe it came down to this."

"Haa, my bad."

"At any rate, could you please somehow stall your death? Though you were the one who did something foolish, I no longer have the time to earn income and alter the magic circle."

"I dunno~"

"Please!"

Saying that, the two of them passed each other.

In the center of the room, the fire raven was already being born.

The bird turned in a circle once like a dance, before it gazed this way.

And it headed in this direction with amazing speed.

At that,

"Oh~"

He let a voice leak out without thinking.

Then he turned around once. It'd still be several seconds before Luke managed to reach the wall with the stakes.

That would be enough time for the fire raven to kill Claugh, and then go after Luke and kill him as well.

In other words, if Claugh failed to take in the fire raven, the two of them would die here.

And this fire raven had apparently killed over three thousand people already. That was to say, the chances that one would survive where three thousand hadn't were next to none.

To say it plainly, it was a despairing statistic.

But nevertheless, a smile arose in Claugh's face. Smiling like that,

"Now then, will I live or die?"

He murmured.

"If I survive,"

He murmured.

"If I somehow survive this..."

The fire raven was already just before his eyes. Nevertheless, with a smile spread across his face, Claugh said,

"If I survive... then I really am special..."

And thus, he would prove that his drug-addicted mother's life had meaning...

There.

The fire raven forcibly opened Claugh's mouth and flew inside.

Uah, he tried to moan, but he no longer had a voice. Travelling down his throat, it felt like something severely unpleasant had entered his body, and that moment—

Everything was dyed a bright red.

It was as if his eyes were burning and melting, as he became unable to see anything.

Then immediately it felt like his body was being hideously burned, before everything became as cold as ice.

There was the sensation of his arms and legs were being torn off, and then, like that, crushed under pressure.

In response, immediately, *ah, this is no good*, he thought.

This is no good, he thought.

I died.

I clearly died.

Just like every other child in this room, his organs were failing and he'd be annihilated.

He'd hoped that somehow his willpower would be enough to make it through this, but it seemed that he wasn't at that level.

At that, *uwa, with this, I have to apologize to Luke*, Claugh thought. If he was going to die like this no matter what, then it would be good if he could somehow let Luke escape.



But it was already too late. Like this, Claugh would be annihilated, and Luke would be ki...

"....."

But then, at that point, his vague thoughts gradually faded away.

And it felt as if his entire body was being destroyed by some kind of strong power.

And everywhere, there was deep, pitch black darkness.

Unable to see anything, he felt like he was sinking into a black swamp.

Claugh was passing deeper, deeper into this darkness.

And.

"....."

He opened his eyes.

Again, he was in that room.

Luke was still running. He had yet to reach the wall.

It felt as if he'd been sinking in that deep darkness for an eternity; however, it seemed that only a couple of seconds had actually passed.

Claugh spoke.

"... Luke."

Immediately.

With a bursting reaction, Luke turned around, and,

"... Eh!?"

He said.

And looking at Claugh, who should've been destroyed but was alive, his eyes widened.

"Heh? Eh? Heh? No way—!?"

He exclaimed.

While staring fixatedly at Claugh,

"Uwa, uwa, you must be kidding me. You survived?"

At that, Claugh grinned broadly, and,

"I ended up surviving,"

He said, in a joking way.

In response,

"Uwa, amaziiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing,"

Luke said, raising his voice in admiration, but he made no move to approach him.

It was only natural.

He'd been trying to kill him up until this point.

He couldn't approach him so carelessly.

Luke stared at him fixatedly with a troubled face.

"Uwaa... uwaa, what's this? This... what is this? The plan I spent so long working on was turned upside down by such a foolish method without any consideration... After wracking my brain each day as much as I did, I feel like quite the idiot now, you know."

He said such a thing.

At that, Claugh shrugged.

"You're actually an idiot, don't you know?"

"I don't want to be told that by the genuine article."

"Do you wanna be killed, asshole?"

"Haha. But right now, that's not possible for you."

Saying that, Luke again held up his finger. He readied himself to draw a magic circle. And,

"Right now, with both of your arms injured, you're not capable of killing me."

At that,

"Well, I guess so,"

Claugh easily nodded.

It wasn't even just his injured arms, but thanks to the backlash from back when his body took in the fire raven, his entire body hurt badly, and it seemed that he could no longer move properly.

"Then, are you going to kill me?"

He asked, but Luke shook his head.

"No, that's not necessary. In the end, due to your absurd actions, a new option that I hadn't been willing to think of has been born. If that's the case, then you and me—both of us can be saved."

In other words, this kind of thing.

As Claugh had survived taking in the fire raven, the experiment was a success, and with this, surviving was also a success.

And if he stayed behind and lied, saying that Luke had been killed by the fire raven and destroyed, then Luke would be able to escape from here.

Both of them would survive, and everything should end happily ever after.

"Well, that's only if I don't tattle and tell the people here that you escaped, huh?"

At that, Luke smiled.

"You won't tell them."

"No, I could unexpectedly be a blabbermouth?"

"That's nothing but a lie."

"It's the truth."

However, Luke smiled further, and,

"No. You wouldn't give the **Emirel Private Forces** anything. I understood that the moment you entered this room. You had strong-willed eyes that burned with hatred. I had hopes that maybe, just maybe, if it was you, you would survive even after accepting the fire raven..."

He began, to which,

"Liar. You didn't hope for anything like that."

Luke smiled at that.

"Well, certainly, that was a lie."

"Everything you've said from the start up until now has been a lie. Geez, that's enough with the bullshit, so hurry up and get to the point. Okay?"

Claugh asked,

"What are you gonna do?"

Luke tilted his head to one side.

At that, Claugh continued.

"Ah? Don't play dumb. Are you really still hesitating in killing me? Then you should've escaped from here a long time ago. If you think there's a chance I'll tattle, then hurry up and kill me. But you were wasting time before with all that super sluggish idle talk... so? Thanks to taking in that fire raven, I'm somehow reaaaaaaaaaaaaally tired, y'know? All this chatter is really dull, so could you just make a decision already?"

At those words, Luke looked at him with a slightly intrigued expression.

"Hoh! After taking in the fire raven, you're tired..."

"Like I said, quit it with the useless talk!"

"Eh~. As I was also somewhat involved with the study, I'm a bit intrigued..."

While saying such things, Luke also moved. He took the stakes out of the wall, picked up his fallen coat, and then put it on.

It seemed like he was preparing to make his escape.

Nevertheless, Claugh couldn't afford to let his guard down. Before escaping, there was the possibility that Luke would attack.

He was that kind of person.

Though he hadn't known him for very long, as this was the guy who had carefully stretched his plan like a cloth around everything, would he make the mistake of letting Claugh, a witness, survive?

"....."

He won't, Claugh thought.

If he made that kind of mistake.

If he was someone who would save someone based on his feelings, then that was his level as a person.

There, Luke looked at him. Placing the stakes in his pockets, he smoothed out the wrinkles in his coat, and then,

"... You likely misunderstand, Claugh. My troubles have already shifted away from the idea of killing you."

"Liar."

"No, unusually, this is the truth."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Well, that's up to you..."

Then Luke stopped his words, looking around the room as if checking for something. Then again, looking this way,

"More importantly, as we're already out of time, could you please be quiet for a bit and listen to what I have to say?"

"I don't wanna."

"Don't say that."

"What merit is there in it for me?"

With a troubled expression,

"I think there's merit in it only for you,"

Luke said such a thing.

At those words, the complexion of Claugh's face changed. With all his heart, he grimaced, and,

"Uwa, this is kinda disgusting. Don't tell me you've fallen madly in love with me?"

"... Er, well, to be frank, that's not what this is about at all."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"Then, talk. Make it short."

"If you don't interrupt, I will."

Claugh nodded at that.

Luke again looked around the room as if to confirm their situation, before he began to talk.

"What I was troubled about before was if I could somehow take you out of here."

Claugh narrowed his eyes in response.

"Haa? What's with that? Didn't you say before that only one person could escape from here?"

"That's correct."

"Then wouldn't it be bad if I tried to escape together with you?"

"It would be bad, yes."

"Then what the hell have you started talking about?"

Claugh asked with a puzzled expression, to which Luke looked slightly thoughtful about, as if thinking over the circumstances, before,

"... As I was saying, my new troubles are now me wondering if I should die here and allow you to escape."

He said such a thing.

At that, Claugh made an increasingly suspicious face, and,

"Haa!? What the hell are you saying?"

He raised his voice in a manner that indicated that he didn't understand, to which Luke spoke in a controlled tone.

"Well, well, anyhow, please listen to me to the very end."

"No, but listening... but seriously, is your head okay? Even though there's the option where you escape separately and I stay here so that the both of us can be saved, why would you specifically die here?"

That, he didn't understand at all. That said, from the beginning up until now, he couldn't predict what this guy was thinking whatsoever.

With eyes that said *you're an idiot, aren't you?*, Claugh stared at Luke, at which the latter smiled wryly while speaking.

"No, though I think that I'm being an overly soft-hearted idiot as well... After witnessing your absurd actions from before, I've begun to think that it would be better for you to survive here..."

He began, but Claugh interrupted.

"Haaaaaaaa? That's why you need to properly explain what you're talking about. Despite the fact that we've established a million times that if you escape and I stay here, we'll both be saved, why do you keep acting like dying for my sake is supposed to be some kind of favour? Instead of it being better if I survive, if both of us survive..."

However, this time it was Luke who interrupted.

"No, if you remain here, you'll definitely die,"

He said quietly.

At that.

"... Huuh~?"

Claugh stopped talking.

Then Luke finally began to explain without any of his idle chatter.

"You took in that fire raven. But that was only the beginning, and from here, the foundation of further research. Well, there isn't enough time to explain the full details, but that fire raven was constructed with a complex **malediction**, and so a human who can take in it possesses an abnormally high resistance to **curses**. That's, well, the basis of this experiment. In other words, it was an experiment to create a sturdy human who wouldn't die even after receiving the

curse. Thus, you are its result. But the experiment doesn't end here. As should go without saying, they'll proceed to the next stage. Because of this **curse** that has now been inserted into you, whose body has been given strong resistance to **curses**, they'll likely discuss strengthening you even further. So, you'll undergo further experimentation. You'll endure, endure, endure, but until you can no longer endure it and die, they'll insert each and every curse into you. While writhing from curses that would normally kill you, you'll be experimented on until you die. Should you remain here, that will be your fate."

Explaining all of that at once, Luke looked this way.

Claugh didn't respond to that. Instead, he was sorting out the information that he'd just been given.

Luke continued.

"But I don't want to allow that. And if it's you, I believe you're capable enough to be my replacement. No, as you're far superior to me, if it's you, who took in that fire raven and holds the vessel of a powerful curse... I believe you could accomplish what I desire more easily than me, so... in that case, to keep you alive and let you escape—that's what I want."

At those words,

"....."

Claugh instinctively felt like laughing.

And this really was a horrible discussion, he thought.

Earlier, if this guy was led by his foolish emotions, if he would make the mistake of letting a witness remain instead of getting rid of them—that was this guy's degree as a man, Claugh had thought.

However, that wasn't his level.

It was far worse.

That he had fragile emotions or some such—that kind of thing wasn't his level.

If he had to say what Luke's weakness was, it was that Luke possessed a fatal flaw.

And this was what he was trying to say.

I want to save you, even if it means throwing away my life.

So in return, would you achieve my goal?

At that, Claugh reflexively made a half-smiling face, as he stared at Luke.

Then he stared at Luke's pure white hair that was unthinkable for a child.

The worst experiment that buried a magic circle into one's brain—he stared at the monster that was produced as the result of that.

"So, you're saying that with me as your replacement, you want me to crush those guys who did that to your body... the **Emirel Private Forces**?"

Luke nodded to that question.

"I've calculated that you should have a high chance of doing so."

"You mean, that calculation comes from your brain that's going around and around with that magic circle buried in it?"

Claugh said, at which a self-deprecating smile arose in Luke's face, and,

"Ah, you know about that?"

He touched his white hair.

Claugh shrugged and continued.

"So, like I thought, the reason you've got an abnormally sharp mind is because of that experiment?"

"I suppose so."

"In that case, you must have a lot of confidence in your head."

Luke smiled sadly at those words.

"My head only makes me a coward."

"Look who's talking. A coward wouldn't carry out an elaborate plan of this scale."

After saying that, Claugh looked around the room.

At the test site buried in magic circles.

All of the children gathered here had already died.

And just how many people had been killed in this place?

No, for the sake of producing Claugh.

For the sake of producing Luke.

How many people-turned-guinea pigs had been killed?

"Geez, this place really is ridiculous,"

Claugh said, spitting out those words.

Then he looked at the strangely sad expression Luke was making. He could already take a guess as to what that guy was thinking.

Here, in this terrible place, it was necessary to crush the victims before leaving.

If it's for that purpose, I'll happily throw away even my own life. Even if it means sacrificing my own life, if it can bring this place down, then that alone will save countless lives.

Everything was for the sake of planning for that.

For that, this plan that went on endlessly.

This plan that was desperately thought of by a brat no older than Claugh.

Luke spoke.

"... If you'll go along with my proposal, then I'll explain to you how to escape from here..."

He began, but to that,

"Ah~ I don't like the way your self-sacrificial feelings are swelling up, so I don't really feel like escaping, y'know?"

As Claugh said that, Luke stared at him blankly again, and,

"Eh?"

He said.

Again, he made an expression that indicated that he didn't understand.

Claugh continued at that.

"I dunno how great your plans are, seeing as how I've already got plans of my own. I'm staying right here."

"Eh? But you do realize that if you stay here, you'll undoubtedly die, correct?"

"Hu~m."

"No, don't just go *hu~m.*"

"Would you say I've got a hundred percent chance of dying?"

At the question, Luke nodded.

"There's a hundred percent chance."

"That's the figure your capable brain has come up with?"

Again, at the question, he nodded.

A hundred percent.

In other words, in a hundred times, he'd die in all hundred. Without a doubt, he'd completely, certainly die.

That was the expected future Luke's genius mind had come up with.

But again, at that, Claugh smiled like a fool.

"But just a while ago, you weren't able to predict at all that I'd take in the fire raven, right? Your predictions aren't always right, huh?"

Luke frowned, and,

"A miracle like that won't happen often, don't you think? Less than one in three thousand?"

"But it happened, didn't it?"

"It won't happen again."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"You really don't think otherwise?"

"No."

"That right?"

"Yes,"

Luke said, staring at him with a serious expression. Judging by that look, he honestly was worried about Claugh and intended to tell him the means of escaping from here.

However, regarding that,

"But..."

Claugh said. Luke then immediately—

"No buts. There isn't any more time. Sooner or later, this experiment's time limit will expire. The supervisor, Rei Stokkart, will..."

He began, but Claugh interrupted him once more and spoke.

"But you know, I've been thinking... so, let's say I don't escape from here. Let's say I don't escape from this crazy experiment that's meant to strengthen me... then I might be able to beat that stupidly strong Rei Stokkart woman, right?"

The moment he said that.

"....."

Luke stopped talking.

But Claugh paid that no heed and continued.

"That's what I've been thinking about from the beginning, instead of escaping... surviving in this place, and becoming stronger until I'm finally able to get past Emirel's grown guards and kill him, you know?"

Then, he remembered.

This place's leader.

The boys and girls who were 7~10 years older than Claugh and surrounded Count Emirel as his guards.

The air they gave off was clearly strange.

If he were to try and kill them, he'd certainly lose.

Moreover, he'd lose in an instant.

Even before fighting them, he understood that and could immediately sense the difference in ability.

From that woman called Rei Stokkart. Still a child who was only older than Claugh by seven or eight years, she was in possession of overwhelming strength.

Why was that?

It was because she'd survived in this hellish place.

She'd struggled along in this domain.

"You might say that I'll definitely, completely, undoubtedly die if I stay in this place, but in order to surpass those monster-like guys, isn't it necessary to have the strength to even survive, huuuh?"

At that question.

"....."

Luke again smiled with an astounded expression.

"... Honestly, listening to your words, it's troubling that they're actually sound."

"If they're sound, they shouldn't be troubling, right?"

"They're troubling. Wouldn't you normally exclude the options with high chances of dying as much as possible? And yet you've discovered the most effective option, as the possibility that one would plunge themselves in like that are abnormally low... Well, something like that are the words of a fool, though."

"Like I said, I'm seriously gonna kill you?"

However, Luke laughed at Claugh's words.

"But that fool is frightening. A frightening fool who pierced through my carefully prepared plans. And if somehow, by any chance, you can truly become a monster who will bring this institute down, then you're frightening... Well, even if I say that, the odds are low."

"But those odds aren't set in stone."

"Correct. They aren't."

After saying that, Luke turned on his heel. Then he placed his hand on the spot on the wall where the stakes had been earlier. And quietly,

"Akurenenaranosa,"

He murmured something like that that couldn't be understood.

But it was, Claugh already understood.

A password. It was likely a password designed as a trick so that one could secretly escape from this room.

As he chanted that—

"....."

Accordingly, part of the wall opened, revealing a path.

Looking at that, Claugh spoke.

"You going?"

Luke looked over his shoulder, and,

"Yes. Well, it's necessary to escape from this place before anyone notices that I'm still here."

"Ha. You say before anyone notices... but I've already noticed."

"But you won't tell them anything."

"Like I said, I might unexpectedly tattle on you?"

It was the same conversation as before.

But its continuation was different.

Luke spoke.

"No, you won't. After all, you're quite competitive. One possibility is that after leaving to the outside, I'll return with a new plan to kill Emirel. Or another possibility is that in this place, you'll obtain enough power, and then kill him yourself..."

Claugh casually raised his eyebrows at that.

"So you're saying it's a competition?"

"Yes."

"I'm definitely gonna win?"

"We'll see about that. Well, for the time being, for the sake of our competition, please survive."

After saying that, Luke simply disappeared into the exit.

Immediately afterwards, the exit closed, and nothing could be seen anymore.

And.

"....."

Only Claugh remained in the room.

In the beginning, he'd been one in a hundred children, but now only he remained.

That scene.

One would see nothing but a sole figure standing perfectly still in that spacious, deserted room.

And he remembered the words Luke had said as he left.

—For the time being, for the sake of our competition, please survive.

Please survive, was it?

"... Well, it looks like that's gonna be tough from here on,"

He muttered.

A small distance away from where he was, the entrance/exit to the room slowly began to open. The light from outside peered in, and before long, mixed in with the light within the room.

And.

A lone girl entered.

Like Luke, pure white hair. She seemed to be around twelve or thirteen years old, but contrasting with that was her

mature expression.

Rei Stokkart.

She had the same surname as Luke, but apparently they weren't related.

Concerning that, it seemed that all who'd undergone the research experiment that involved tampering with one's brain and burying a magic circle in it were called Stokkart?

That was what he figured.

Well, that wasn't important right now either way.

What he should be thinking about now was how to survive the experiments that this woman would run from here.

And to hurry up and become stronger than anyone else, to take Emirel's head before anyone else could.

For that reason, it was necessary to surpass this woman's strength.

"....."

Claugh stared at Rei Stokkart.

He couldn't discover any openings in her movements whatsoever, and despite the fact that they were a considerable distance from each other, he could feel the sharp aura she gave off.

Regarding that, he spoke in an exasperated tone.

"Hey, will the day come when I can surpass that kinda monster?"

Then, Rei noticed him. Her intelligent eyes widening slightly in surprise, she said,

"Oh my, you survived."

At that, Claugh remembered to put on the act that he'd done so before around Rei.

A child who still didn't understand anything.

A powerless, cowardly, frightened child.

As he remembered that, while thinking *Ah, geez, this really suuuucks,*

"R-Rei!? Did you come to save us!?"

While raising his voice in such an annoying manner, Claugh began to run. With a face like he was about to cry. With the face like that of a puppy who'd been left alone in this hellish place and had finally found his saviour.

"Everyone died!? Everyone died!"

He cried out.

And he thought.

Everyone died.

Everyone died.

But next, it'll be your turn.

"....."

Of course, right now, he was lacking in power, but he thought about killing all of the people in this establishment.

After all, he promised his mother that.

After all, that was the first purpose in life Claugh had ever been given.

First, he would kill this woman, and then he'd kill the guards surrounding Emirel.

And finally, he would then kill Count Emirel.

He would do it before that cocky brat known as Luke or whatever returned.

Rei spoke. Looking at Claugh, who was crying out while approaching, she said in a horribly cold voice,

"Stop crying out with the *gyaa, gyaa*. I'll kill you?"

At that, Claugh trembled greatly. His expression became fearful.

After confirming that with a satisfied nod, she approached him.

"... However, you did well to survive. Even though I didn't think anyone would survive the **malediction matter** procedure... It seems you're more competent than I thought, hmm?"

While saying that, she held out her hand and stroked his head. While that hand made his hair dishevelled,

"I'm competent?"

Claugh asked timidly, to which she smiled.

"Competent, competent. You've proven yourself to be useful to this organization. With this, you have officially become a member of the **Emirel Private Forces**. And I will be your instructor. You'll be coming with me so that you can be changed into an even more useful being. Therefore, from hereon, please call me 'teacher.' "

I'm gonna be sick, he thought.

But he didn't let any of that show. Not yet. He had to wait for just a bit longer.

That was why Claugh said,

"Yes, Teacher!"

Rei nodded.

"Good. Then, please rest today. We'll take care of your arms' injuries,"

She said, turning on her heel. She didn't even make any pointless movements at all. One way or another, it seemed that it'd take a long time to reach that.

There was still time.

Regarding that, he had everything he needed here as well.

In that case, there isn't a problem, he thought.

"....."

After all, if he survived, he had as much time as he needed to become stronger.

Claugh continued to follow behind Rei.

She passed through the room gate and disappeared to the opposite side.

He didn't know what was waiting there, but, well, they were probably continuing on to another hell.

These mad people, with their mad human experimentation in this mad place.

This place where Luke claimed he would definitely, undoubtedly, completely die.

He stared at that.

"....."

However, Claugh smiled.

He wasn't nervous.

He wasn't nervous about advancing forward.

No, rather, it was even a pleasant feeling.

He'd spent day after day being only beaten by his mother, where nothing changed.

A stagnating time.

Now, he was moving.

First becoming a member of the **Emirel Private Forces**, he was advancing forward.

With his true strength, he didn't know how far he could go.

"... I've gotta work hard so that Luke idiot can't make a fool out of me, huh?"

Muttering that, he began to walk forward.

And this was—

The demon of the battlefield.

Crimson Fingered Claugh, the name of the demon that roared all the way to the neighbouring countries, engraved in Roland's history—this was his beginning.

◆

After that, time quickly flew by.

If anything was being done to stabilize the Roland Empire's situation, though there was a horrible revolt—during the first five years, Claugh wasn't involved with any of that.

By the next five years, he left that world.

Having obtained the title of the **Emirel Private Forces** Eighth Top Graduate at the tender age of fifteen, he'd received several titles from the Roland army through numerous battles.

And through his service, Count Emirel's power had grown.

From some time ago, Claug had become like a blade that ripped everything apart in Count Emirel's hands and so had been appointed to a fitting post.

It was only natural. At any rate, no matter the battle, no matter the assassination, he'd never made a mistake.

He'd completed each of his tasks quickly and as efficiently as possible.

He didn't sympathize with the enemy.

He never gave the other party more attention than needed.

And so, everyone came to fear him.

His appearance alone would cause everyone to tremble in fear and flee, and so within the Roland Empire... No, within the armies of their enemy countries, his name roared.

And as his name was elevated to such an extent, Count Emirel's power continued to increase.

No matter how unstable the political situation became, Count Emirel's standing never shook.

Thus, Claug became known as a death god.

They became equal to other private forces possessing abnormal power, such as **Roland Special Institute #307** and the **Hidden Elites**, and within, they concealed a demon with outstanding genius—Crimson Fingered Claug Klom.

And as rumours spread that there was no longer anyone that could touch him, Count Emirel's power grew.

Protected by guards on every side, it was impossible to get near him.

But it'd already been like that by that time.

"....."

Claug had just obtained enough power to kill Count Emirel.

No, he felt as if he could've sliced off Count Emirel's neck by the time he was fourteen.

He believed that he already had just enough power to kill Count Emirel and escape from any pursuers from the **Emirel Private Forces**...

However, he didn't do such a thing.

Because he thought that he could still advance slightly further. Because he wanted to get a hold of just a bit more power.

And then another year passed.

He'd again become the strongest, but still, he didn't lay a hand on Count Emirel.

And then another year passed.

And another.

He'd become seventeen years old.

Despite that, he still hadn't killed Count Emirel.

No, by then, he'd discovered a new way to entertain himself.

Like this, he would surpass Emirel, and together with the trash of this country, he would clean up all of it—how about that?

The ones who'd formed this mad country.

He'd kill all the insane ones who'd gotten his mother addicted to drugs, who laughed so frivolously as they destroyed the lives of others purely for their own self-interests—how about that?

For that reason, it wasn't enough to just kill Emirel.

No, rather, he had to let him live, manipulate him, and then let him rise to the top.

First, the top of military circles.

And then he'd seize the entire army and crush this country. He had a feeling that that would be a rather interesting means of entertainment.

That was why he hadn't killed Emirel. Because he'd found his destination.

Because he'd found his destination, he advanced down that path.

But then.

"....."

Claugh, sensing a presence from behind, looked over his shoulder.

Right now, he was in a room of the three-story mansion that Emirel had given him.

With fifteen large rooms, even though it was the sort of thing bestowed upon members of the **Emirel Private Forces**, it was an extremely large building.

In other words, it was proof that he'd received that extent of faith from the count.

However, within this mansion, all he used was this one room.

Just this square room out of three storeys.

He didn't bother to enter the other rooms.

But in this room alone, he'd arranged all that he needed.

A bed, a bookshelf, and a mirror.

In every direction, covering all the walls, he'd put in place separate pieces of a large, flat mirror.

The reason was simple.

So that he could deal with any enemy that snuck up on him from behind, even if they erased all signs of their presence.

"....."

Claugh looked behind him, with his reflection appearing in that piece of the mirror.

Red hair as if it were burning, bright red eyes. Though there were still traces of a child in his face, his stature couldn't even be compared to that when he was five. His body had been forged and disciplined, and furthermore, he had countless assassination tools on his crimson uniform, exclusive to the **Emirel Private Forces**.

He looked entirely like a dangerous weapon, ready to be used.

But for him, this figure had always been asleep.

Because with his power, he was becoming a threat, and so when the **Emirel Private Forces** might send other members to assassinate him, he didn't know.

No, he'd already been involved with several of such tasks. If they had reason to suspect you, then the members who were ordered to disappear would disappear. And as for when he might be on the receiving end of that spear, he didn't know.

Well, when that time came, he didn't think there was anyone else in the **Emirel Private Forces** who was strong enough to kill him.

"....."

However, right now, even he was slightly surprised at what was happening in this room.

Feeling a presence from behind him, he turned around.

But there was no one there.

No, that wasn't the only problem.

The problem was what was reflected in the mirror.

A knife.

From behind Claugh, slowly pressing against his neck, was a knife.

Furthermore, the wielder of that knife revealed himself from behind Claugh's back.

From the opposite direction that he felt the presence, a young man that seemed to be around Claugh's age revealed himself.

Claugh looked at his face.

Long, bright white hair, and a calm, pretentious face.

It was him.

That irritating brat that he'd met in that experiment site.

Luke Stokkart.

His grown-up figure was here in this room. Though he was around the same height as Claugh, the rest of him gave off a different impression. He had a lithe body that seemed like it was trained more to be flexible.

And his presence was strangely thin.

It was to the extent that Claugh misread his presence's whereabouts. From that alone, Claugh could estimate the

amount of strength he possessed.

He was dressed in the uniform of Roland's army. On top of that, his ranking was that of a private.

Even within the military, it was the lowest ranking.

But at that, a smile spread across Claugh's face.

"... A guy who'd thrust a knife at me, a private?"

With a calm smile, Luke replied,

"No matter how hard I try, it seems that all my effort goes to waste. Lady Luck isn't on my side."

The way he'd referred to himself had changed.^[2]

But his way of talking hadn't changed. Without revealing his true feelings, he kept his claws hidden as he plotted and manipulated everything—that kind of tone.

Claugh again smiled at that tone.

"Like I'd believe that."

In the instant he said that, he casually pinched the knife with his fingers. Like that, he firmly applied some pressure, breaking the blade.

At that,

"Oh, amazing. I didn't even follow that movement that just now."



"That's 'cause you've always been slow."

"I suppose so."



"But even if you couldn't follow it, you've still got a bunch of ways to deal with it, right?"

Claugh said, to which Luke didn't respond but instead smiled.

It was a composed smile. On top of that, it was different from before. A deep smile, whose bottom couldn't be seen.

Looking at that, Claugh thought over some things.

Now then, if the two of us were to fight here, would I win?

He thought about that.

While thinking about that, realizing that, *Just by meeting with him, I'm already thinking about the two of us killing each other, huh?* made him smile wryly.

Well, that was how it was.

Right now, if they were to fight here, who would be the victor?

It seemed that the situation was slightly advantageous to the other party.

It'd been twelve years since then.

Certainly, Claugh had become stronger, but because of that, he'd become prominent in this country.

That was to say, Luke should be able to estimate how strong Claugh was.

But what about Luke?

Him, who crept up on Claugh from behind, while putting only just enough force in his hand to thrust a knife at him—his name wasn't known at all.

Creeping in the darkness, he continued to reserve his strength.

Right now, what kind of skill does this guy possess?

And just how much of a trap did he set about in this room?

Claugh couldn't estimate that at all.

But, even without estimating,

"... I'll kill you,"

He believed that much.

With his power, he believed that much about himself.

Luke spoke.

"I'm also going to kill you."

"Heh. You sure about that?"

"Yes."

"Then, let's go?"

Saying that, Claugh unleashed killing intent. And like that, it was enough to slam Luke.

For some reason, Luke seemed cheerful at that, and said,

"Wah, scary. You truly are frighteningly strong. Well, to survive in this hell, you've once again overturned my expectations."

As Luke said such things frivolously, Claugh suddenly wanted to sock him in the face.

Right now, even after receiving his killing intent, the other party didn't seem so tense.

No, even if Claugh were to attack right now, this guy likely had a plan to deal with that. He would've built up that much strength over the last twelve years.

At that, Claugh instinctively smiled. That an enemy who could stand on his level was before him, he instinctively smiled.

That that brat who should've died that day would survive and be here now was strangely pleasing. At the same time, though, that kind of happiness brought forth some irritation from within him, resulting in a feeling he didn't understand very well.

With an expression as if he were seeing right through Claugh, Luke spoke.

"But it seems that killing each other here isn't option, remember? After all, wasn't the arrangement for the outcome of our fight to be decided elsewhere?"

Regarding that, Claugh remembered. The arrangement he made with this guy. The arrangement he made when he encountered Luke twelve years ago.

It was something like this.

—*Who will kill Emirel first?*

Luke spoke.

"Why, even though you possess that level of power, have you not killed the count?"

Claugh scowled at that question.

"... The situation's kinda changed."

"Hmm. Is that supposed to be an excuse?"

"No, it's not an excuse... For that matter, what about you, huh? That Emirel guy's still dancing around, y'know?"

Luke smiled at Claugh's words, and,

"But I could kill him at any moment? Then, it seems that this is, without a doubt, my victory..."

"Hey, hey, hold on. What the hell is that supposed to mean? I'm gonna be the one to kill him. Hell, I could probably have killed him when I was fourteen..."

He began, but Luke interrupted him midway.

"Then, I could've killed him when I was thirteen?"

"Haa? You're suddenly saying that now? In that case, when I was twelve..."

"Ah, now that I think about it, even when I was eleven..."

"Ahhhh!? Then, when I was ten!"

"Is that so? In that case, even when I was nine, hmm?"

"In that case, when I was eight!"

"Then, when I was seven."

"Six!"

"Five!"

"Four!"

"Three!"

"Two!"

Then, crossing his arms with a serious look on his face, Luke said,

"Hmm. Now that I think quite heavily on it, I think I could've, the moment I was born..."

"As if!?"

While yelling that, Claugh looked at Luke with an astonished expression.

"Y'know, even though you've got that expression like you wouldn't even kill a cat, you're surprisingly a sore loser, aren't you?"

In response to that, Luke said,

"Ri~ght. Or rather, I don't believe that I've ever lost in anything to anyone."

Listening to such words, Claugh, without thinking, said,

"... This guy's the genuine article."

"Genuine what?"

"A genuine *brat*."

Luke laughed at that.

"Aha. Well, it's my long-awaited reunion with my childhood friend, so I'm in high spirits."

"We're not childhood friends or anything like that."

"Eh~ Don't say such lonely things..."

Luke said, and then after making an obviously fake sad face, looked his way.

"Well, let's put that joke aside now."

"Your jokes are always stupid, so I hate them."

"Saying that again? I know you actually want to burst out laughing."

"I do *not*."

"You don't have to hide it, you know."

"Geez, just drop it and move on! So, what did you come for now of all times? More than that, actually, what the hell have you been doing up until now?"

In response to Claugh's question, Luke pointed his way, and,

"The same thing as you?"

He said.

The same thing as you.

In other words, revenge.

Revenge against the world.

Struggling to change this mad country even a little.

Luke was also after that, apparently.

And chances were, he had reached the same conclusion that Claugh did.

That conclusion was that even if Emirel were killed, nothing would change.

Even if the **Emirel Private Forces** were crushed, nobody would be saved.

Because this mad country would rise again immediately afterwards.

Because greed would rise again immediately afterwards.

Already, Claugh understood just from looking at Luke. Luke as well, by now, likely had the power to kill Emirel, who was the reason that he felt that he couldn't get too close to anyone in the world.

However, he didn't do so.

After all, there were other things that he had to do.

But in that case,

"What the hell did you come here for?"

Claugh asked, as Luke looked at him. And then he spoke.

"To win against you."

"You mean in killing Emirel?"

"Correct."

"If so, then that kinda poses a problem. I've been using the guy, and I'm this close to the top..."

In response, Luke easily smiled, and,

"We're wiping that plan clean."

"Don't just decide that for yourself."

"But there's an even better plan out there. Please, go along with it."

"No way in hell. Or better said, it's another plan where you're the only one smiling in the end, isn't it?"

Claugh said, scowling, to which Luke again laughed.

"And if I said that this time, you'll also be able to smile quite happily?"

"Just 'smile quite happily?'"

"Isn't that enough? Perhaps, after this country changes completely in less than half the time of your plan to overthrow Roland—the *ah, well, though I lost in various matters to Luke-san, I also worked hard, huh?* sort of smile... something like that?"

"I'd hate that more than anything, y'know?"

"Is that so?"

"Yeah."

Claugh said, but afterwards, he thought about how he wouldn't really hate that above all.

His plan to manipulate the country should still take a considerable amount of time to execute.

But this guy said he had a plan that would take less than half that time.

He was saying that the shortest method that Claugh had come up with could be reduced to half its time. As for how many years that would be... as soon as he began thinking about that, again as if seeing right through him, Luke spoke.

"Seven years. In seven years, everything will change. We already have the person who's prepared what we need for that plan alone."

Claugh lifted his head at that. Then he asked,

"It's not your plan?"

"I'm afraid that no, it isn't. There happens to be someone with a sharper head than me, who can plan further ahead than me, and so it was a simple matter to join him."

On account of those words, Claugh became slightly intrigued.

"Hoho. Now that I know that it's not your plan, it sounds kind of interesting."

"I thought you would say that. However, I think so as well."

Then Luke moved slightly away from Claugh. And he walked over to where the window was.

He opened the window by a bit.

Though the window should've been locked, it opened. Though there should've been no way to open the window from outside, it seemed that somehow, Luke had undone the lock and snuck into the room through the window.

It was likely that he'd hidden himself in the room before Claugh entered and erased signs of his presence?

Well, that no longer mattered now.

Luke pushed at the window with his hand, opening it until it was wide enough for roughly one person to pass through. Then he looked over his shoulder and at Claugh, as he said,

"Claugh."

"Yeah?"

"Then, with this, you're also a member of our organization from here on."

"That has nothing at all to do with what I want!"

As Claugh shouted that, Luke looked at him with a slightly curious expression, and,

"It doesn't?"

"I swear I'll punch you, y'know?"

"While that's fine, even if you punch me, it won't change matters, will it? From now on, your duty..."

"I told you, no way! I haven't even given my answer yet!"

"With or without your response, there's only one option, and so I don't need to hear it. At any rate, my plan includes killing Count Emirel, the man that you're using. And you, who've lost your employer, will be left abandoned on the

streets, crying, 'Mama, save me~'..."

"What the hell!?"

"Then, a chance meeting. With, from when you were young, your childhood friend whom you made an arrangement to see who could kill Emirel first~ or some such, Luke-san. And in the end, that victory goes to big brother Luke, doesn't it? *Because I lost, I'll listen to everything big brother Luke says~* Knowing that, you decide to listen to everything I say from he..."

"Don't mess with meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

Claugh yelled, to which Luke said,

"I'm not messing with you. I'm serious."

"You're pissing me off more and more! For starters, what do you mean, big brother? How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"Aren't you the same age as me!?"

"No, but see, my mental age..."

Though, at that, Claugh wanted to yell at him with all his might, he instead let out a deep sigh, before taking in a deep breath, and,

"Well, since I'm mentally an adult, I won't yell."

"Ah, but that kind of response in itself is still childish,"

Luke said with a calm expression. He spoke in a tone that made it clear that he was trying to provoke Claugh.

In response, though Claugh inwardly let it out with, *Ahhhhhhhhh, this guy!?* *Ahhhhhhhhh, I swear, this guy!?*, he reminded himself that he was completely, mentally an adult, and so he suppressed those feelings and said,

"So, in the end, you guys don't need Emirel for your plan?"

Luke nodded.

"We'll make use of another noble. Or rather, as we're manipulating several nobles already, we've established connections all the way up to the royal family. If we press forward like this, Count Emirel will become a hindrance. He possesses just a bit too much power. Well, that's primarily due to your achievements..."

"Then, he has to disappear?"

"Yes."

Luke nodded.

Regarding that, Claugh thought it over a little.

Roland as it was right now.

This country where the royalty and nobility had too much power, to the point where nobody was able to move anymore, and how, in order to manipulate the nobles, Count Emirel was to be killed.

It was an unthinkable topic.

Furthermore, even after having been acting in such a flashy manner, they hadn't stood out to anyone. At the very least, Claugh didn't know of this group's existence.

He asked,

"So, whose plan is this?"

Luke easily answered,

"Miller-san. Second Lieutenant Rahel Miller. Are you acquainted?"

At those words.

Just now, Claugh wanted to burst into laughter.

Rahel Miller.

Rahel Miller.

It was a relatively well-known name.

But not in a good way.

A man who was drunk with political power, by sucking up to the nobles. A coward who, even during a war, would never go out to the front lines. Someone who valued his own life above all else, he avoided going to the front lines by secretly bargaining with the nobles, and to ensure that security, he would offer money and women.

Claugh thought he was a man who wasn't even worth killing. No, right now, until Luke mentioned him just now, it was a name he didn't even bother to think about.

He'd only heard of him through the rumours of what a depraved and filthy man he was.

But what that kind of guy was actually doing was,

"....."

Mobilizing Luke, mobilizing a group, manipulating the nobles, and apparently trying to change the world.

More cautious than anyone else, more serious than anyone else.

This is...

Claugh thought.

This guy might be able to do it, he thought.

"So, what will you do? Well, I was already told by Miller-san to scout worthy people, so I hope that you won't refuse,"

Luke said.

In response, Claugh, in a tone that suggested that Luke should already know, spoke.

"Bastard, you've already decided on your own, haven't you?"

"Well, that goes without saying."

"I'm saying that I didn't know."

"Eh~, then does that mean you won't become our ally?"

"....."

Claugh didn't answer.

Though he couldn't say without meeting this Miller in person, but if what Luke was saying was true—

If right now, further than Claugh, further than Luke, Miller had advanced forward, then there was no reason to refuse the invitation.

That was why he said,

"Hey, Luke."

"What is it?"

"Though becoming your ally doesn't sound like such a bad idea... there's something I wanna ask first."

"Something you want to ask?"

"Yeah,"

Claugh said, nodding, before he crouched slightly. He began to gather his strength. And,

"Regarding your plan, when are you gonna kill Emirel..."

He began, but then.

All of a sudden, Luke hurriedly jumped out the window.

At that, Claugh grinned broadly.

"Whoops, looks like you haven't killed Emirel yet, huh!?"

And as if continuing from there, he also jumped out the window. Kicking the windowframe, he ended up in the garden.

From there, he immediately began chasing Luke.

"Haha~! You're as much of a blockhead as ever, aren't you? No matter how you look at it, this is gonna be my victory. The one who'll kill Emirel first is me. Then, afterwards, you'll be the one calling *me* big brother Claugh, huh?"

He said, when,

"As if!"

Luke moved to strike him with his hand.

It was a considerably sharp strike.

However,

"You're too slow,"

Claugh easily dodged it. Furthermore, he grabbed Luke's arm and then threw him.

"Uwah—"

Luke flew through the air; however, in mid-air, he rearranged his posture and landed on the ground safely.

Nevertheless, it was over.

There was no longer any way he could catch up.

"P-Please wait!"

He called out, to which Claugh looked over his shoulder and stuck out his tongue as if Luke were an idiot. In response, Luke seemed to be saying something, but already, Claugh was too far away to hear.

Like that, he turned forward. And, he ran.

Towards his goal, where Emirel was.

Right about now, he should be leaving the residence where the nobles were having a party. If he were to kill him, attacking his carriage would work.

Though there'd likely be several guards, they weren't a problem. After all, by this point, there was no longer anyone in the **Emirel Private Forces** who could match Claugh.

Then,

"Ah, that reminds me,"

He recalled something that had been on his mind, just a bit.

Lately, he'd heard about how, among Emirel's guards, there was a guy who was rumoured to be superior to Claugh, who was now in second.

If he recalled correctly, his name was Calne or something like that.

The Fifteenth Top Graduate of the **Emirel Private Forces**.

Either way, he was also a member of the military, and succeeding Claugh, was advancing down the path of the elite.

Moreover, someone else was still there as well.

That woman.

The woman who had previously taught Claugh.

In magic, in tactics, in strategy—the woman who'd beaten all of that into Claugh.

Rei Stokkart.

Perhaps, if he were to attack Emirel, he'd also encounter her.

Regarding that,

"....."

He didn't have anything particular feelings, though. After all, he hadn't thought much of her from the very beginning. It was necessary to go higher. It was necessary to go further.

That was why, though he was finally going to kill Emirel, he didn't feel much of anything.

Instead, if he had to assume he felt something inside of his chest, there was just the slightest feeling of

achievement.

His only strong feeling was that he was going to achieve his drug-addicted mother's wish.

But even that disappeared immediately.

It fled and disappeared.

He could see the sun falling near the division where the members of the **Emirel Private Forces** were.

He could see the blood-red sky gradually turning darker, as if being dyed black.

All that dominated his mind in the end was how to slaughter everyone.

And he finally reached the center of long, wide path within the nobles' division.

Though there was the occasional carriage, here and there, it wasn't especially populated.

No, from the beginning, the size of the nobles' residence area, compared to the number of people living in it, was skewed, hence why there were so few signs of life.

He stared at the one carriage coming down the path towards him. Something that he had once protected before, it was an extravagant carriage with navy blue as its main colour. And unsurprisingly, surrounding that carriage from all sides were guards.

Clearly giving off a different air from the guards that protected other nobles' carriages, they were guards who rode on horses and wore the crimson uniform of the **Emirel Private Forces**.

He looked at those four.

And for each one, he made an estimate of their true power.

The one at the front was out of the question.

As was the man on the left.

The right one was...

Then.

"... It's that guy, huh?"

Claugh muttered.

On the right, he saw a boy, not even appearing to be ten years old yet and with soft blond hair, and thought that that was the one who was Emirel's favourite nowadays. The most recent top graduate of the **Emirel Private Forces**.

Calne, or something like that.

He could tell just by looking.

He possessed an air unlike the ones belonging to the guard at the front or to the left.

He had a dull, cold glint in his eyes.

Those eyes noticed Claugh's figure sooner than any of the other carriage guards.

There was a tinge of vigilance in them.

But he wasn't conveying that to his other allies. Without a doubt, the other party had realized as well. Even if he told the other three about Claugh's presence, it wouldn't help.

By looking at Claugh, Calne realized the difference in power.

That was why, instead, he continued to stare Claugh's way with cold eyes.

In return, Claugh shot him a smile. Then, raising a finger, he made a motion as if slitting his throat. After that, he waved a hand, sending a signal.

I've come to kill you.

If you don't want to die, then go ahead and run away.

Then, finally, the woman protecting the carriage's rear noticed him.

Moving slightly ahead on her horse, she came up to Calne's side and stared this way.

It was Rei Stokkart.

How many years had it been since they met?

Looking at her properly now in this way, she was an amazingly beautiful woman. As she was seven years older than Claugh, she was now twenty-four, right? From the last time he'd seen her, how much stronger had she gotten?

"....."

Claugh couldn't tell just by looking. That wasn't surprising. Back when Claugh was nine, he'd already felt that there was nothing that could be absorbed from her, and that impression of her hadn't changed.

Nevertheless, to the very end, Claugh had kept up his act as the obedient student, and so as soon as she saw him, she smiled slightly. But then immediately, that expression faltered. She looked at Claugh's figure. She felt the dim killing intent coming from his body.

She called out.

To Calne and to the other two guards.

"... An enemy has..."

But it was already too late.

Claugh ran. Before her voice could sound out, he'd crossed the space between him and the carriage in an instant. And he threw a punch at the face of the front guard. As the man's face crumpled underneath his fist, leaving an unpleasant sensation, Claugh knew already that he didn't need to knock him unconscious.

Thus, he turned to the next man.

Then, finally, the man noticed his presence.

However, there was no longer any point.

At the same time that, upon noticing him, the man's eyes widened, Claugh's kick had already sunk into the nape of the man's neck.

With that, it was over.

Nevertheless, Claugh didn't stop. He jumped, landing on the coachman's seat. Like that, he delivered a handchop to the coachman's neck, rendering him unconscious. Grabbing the horse's reins, he stopped the horse. Then, gradually, he had the carriage grind to a halt.

His actions up until that point had barely made a sound.

It'd all been done in an instant.

The incident was lost in the darkness of the night.

The other carriages coming up and down the path hadn't noticed what was going on here at all.

Except for two people.

Except for the two guards, Calne and Rei.

Then, from within the carriage, a male voice spoke.

"Why has the carriage stopped?"

Emirel asked that.

But,

"....."

Not a single person answered.

With tense faces, the two guards looked up at Claugh, standing on the coachman's seat.

Rei spoke.

"Why are you doing this? Claugh."

At that question, Claugh looked down at her, and replied,

"Why are you always here? Because, by being the nobles' yes-man, you can live the best life possible?"

At those words, her expression again faltered.

"... My, is that how you see me?"

She began, but Claugh shook his head.

"I don't care that much about you."

"I suppose so. After all, you're a special child... so quickly surpassing me in power... However, considering how obedient you pretended to be, an irritating child as well, hmm?"

Somehow, it seemed that his act had been exposed.

Rei continued.

"Then, you've come to finish unsettled business and kill our leader?"

Claugh, with a *yeah*, nodded.

But a smile spread across her face.

"But that's impossible for you. With your current strength, you can't match me and, furthermore, Calne Kaiwel here at the same time,"

She said.

In response, Claugh looked at this Calne Kaiwel. A never-changing emotionless expression on his face, he looked at up Claugh with dull eyes.

This guy was,

"Your new guinea pig?"

He asked, to which she smiled.

"My greatest work. Likely stronger than you..."

She began, but then, her words stopped.

Because all of a sudden, Calne delivered a hit to her neck.

"Ah—"

Letting out a small voice, she lost consciousness and collapsed onto her horse. With that, she was silent.

Looking down at that scene,

"Hey, hey, just what the hell are you trying to copy with that?"

He asked, at which Calne looked up at him and spoke. Unsurprisingly, with a dull, wry smile,

"... It's troubling, isn't it, senpai? You've come to kill Emirel, correct?"

"I guess so."

"However, that would be my task."

"Ah~, what's this? You're also part of the anti-noble faction, huh? But too bad, 'cause this task is mine."

"I won't let you. I've been been preparing for too long, and as tomorrow will be the climax where I kill his entire family, I refuse to let this be stolen away from someone else."

"Then, will you get in my way?"

"It looks that way."

"D'you think you can win?"

In a response, a smile arose in Calne's face.

Claugh knew he was gathering power in his body. Even just by looking at the way Calne transferred his strength, he could tell that Calne was stronger than Rei Stokkart.

And Calne asked,

"Do you know what they call me?"

In response, Claugh spoke in an uninterested tone.

"If you're a guy who has to ask that, you must be weak, huh?"

"Just hurry up and answer, please."

"Uwah, you're a really noisy guy, aren't you?"

"Hurry!"

"Isn't it obvious that I don't know? What is it?"

Calne spoke. With an expression that was strangely brimming with self-confidence,

"They call me the genius that surpasses Crimson Fingered Claugh Klom..."

However, before he finished, he made his move. Withdrawing a knife from his pocket, he threw it at Claugh.

"Whoa—"

Though Claugh easily dodged it, Calne's finger was already dancing through the air. He was drawing a magic circle. Furthermore, his movements were considerably quick.

Regarding that, Claugh said,

"Not to mention that you're a pretty underhanded guy, huh?"

Calne smiled.

"All's fair in love and..."

He began, but then his words stopped.

From behind the guy who was smiling while drawing his magic circle,

"No arguments here."

As Claugh said, he grabbed the finger.

Calne, who didn't follow his movements at all, looked over his shoulder with a shocked expression, and,

"What the... so fast..."

He began, but then he said no more.

Without hesitating, Claugh broke Calne's finger. Furthermore, he broke his arm. Grabbing his hair, he pulled him off the horse, and then slammed his head against the ground. Then he hit him. Again, he hit him.

Afterwards, he pressed a knee to the limp Calne's neck, stopping just before then, and,

"... So, who's the genius that surpasses Crimson Fingered Claugh?"

He asked.

With a face that suggested that he was completely worn-out and had no strength to fight back, Calne spoke.

"... U~m... at the very least, I'm not at the level of a monster like this, it seems."

"Then, you ready to die?"

"Though that's fine... you're going to let me live, aren't you?"

Claugh laughed at that.

"Oh, you understand me well, huh?"

Even though he was a brat who wasn't even ten yet, with his hatred towards the nobles, he calmly tried to kill Emirel, and furthermore was an amusing brat who struck Rei, so Claugh thought it would be a waste to kill him.

But to that, Calne said,

"Of course you would let me live? Because I'm too adorable?"

The moment he said such a thing, Claugh pressed further down at Calne's neck.

"I'm joking, I'm joking!"

Then, Claugh stopped. Like that, Claugh stood up, releasing Calne, and,

"You shouldn't make dangerous jokes."

"... Well said."

"You should be more alert, y'know?"

"... Understood. I'll be more alert so that I don't become too adorable."

"....."

At Calne's words, as he thought, it would be unwise to kill this guy here, given his dangerous character; that said, Claugh put that aside for now.

He looked towards the carriage.

Inside the carriage was where Count Emirel was.

If Claugh killed him, then for the time being, everything that he should do here would come to an end.

Revenge for his mother would be achieved, and after rising through the military for several years for his plan to change the world, everything would come to an end.

"Now then. Let's finish this,"

He said, approaching the carriage.

Then, he opened the door. He got onto the carriage.

Inside was Count Emirel.

With white hair that had thinned further from when Claugh met him at the age of five, his typical greedy smile.

These twelve years.

Though he felt uncomfortable every time he saw that man's face, today he felt no such thing.

"....."

Rather, as Claugh looked at Emirel,

"A-Are you serious..."

He muttered without thinking.

On top of that, his voice was trembling slightly.

What he was so surprised over was Emirel's figure.

Because,

"....."

Because inside the carriage, Emirel was dead.

Regarding that,

"N-No, no, no, no, no, it shouldn't be like this, right? I mean, earlier, he asked why the carriage stopped, didn't he? Then why..."

He began, wondering why Emirel was dead.

The answer to this mystery was simple.

Again, it was *him*.

He did it.

Before Claugh, that annoying, white-haired bastard...

Then from behind,

"Have you killed him already~? Otherwise, can I take my part?"

As Calne spoke in such a frivolous voice, Claugh turned around.

After seeing Emirel's corpse, Calne looked at him, and,

"Ah, you've done it. Honestly, even though I wanted to get a hit in too... well, whatever. Then, what are you going to do from here? After all, when it comes to killing nobles, society treats that very harshly, you know? Where will you escape to? Of course, Claugh, you'll protect me, right? That'll be your responsibility?"

"... your..."

However, his voice was too quiet, as Calne apparently didn't hear.

"Eh? What?"

He asked.

Thus, Claugh said it one more time. This time, in a clear, loud voice,

"... It's your fault that that guy beat me, isn't it!?"

And he let his fist fly.

As that fist hit Calne's face,

"Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!?"

While crying out, he was sent spinning into the air.

Claugh confirmed that, and then as he looked up at the dark sky,

"Ah~, damn it, this is the worst. 'Cause of this, that guy's gonna be incredibly cocky the next time we meet, isn't he... Geez, what should I do?"

He spoke in a frustrated voice.

The sky was dark. With pure black clouds covering it all, the stars and moon couldn't be seen. As Claugh gazed at it for a while, Calne, who'd been sent flying, suddenly got up, returned to him, and said,

"Geez! What'd you do that all of a sudden for!?"

In response, Claugh looked Calne's way, and then,

"Well, but there's nowhere to go, huh...?"

Ignoring him, he began to walk.

Calne followed him.

"Excuse me, what are you ignoring me for?"

"....."

"Excuse me!"

"Shut up."

Like that, Calne reached Claugh's side and spoke.

"Then, after killing an almighty noble, you have somewhere that you can hide?"

"Nope."

"Eh~. Then where are you going?"

"To a really shitty place."

At that, Calne came to a halt.

"Ehhhhhhh~... so this is the Crimson Fingered Claugh? Somehow, I don't feel like I can keep up,"

He said in an insecure voice.

But Claugh didn't stop. Without looking back,

"I didn't say to follow me, y'know."

"But I have nowhere else to go."

"I know."

"Then please understand! Please understand my lonely futu..."

"Damn it, just shut up already!"

While talking like that, the two disappeared into the night.

And afterwards, those two went missing.

According to the records and the eyewitness reports, the two disappeared completely.

As several years went by, their existences ultimately began to fade from people's memory.

Crimson Fingered Claugh, and Calne Kaiwel.

For those two, their existences vanished.

Then again, the two emerged in the world, as their names roared once more, at which point six years had passed.

◆
◆
◆

And so, at the end of those six years.

◆
◆
◆

Again, nighttime.

Unsurprisingly, as the moonlight couldn't reach the vast land, it was a dark night.

"....."

Attacking the nobles alone, and killing them.

A murderous demon.

A red-haired demon.

Looking at that demon.

Just by looking, one would be sent trembling, as brutal killing intent overflowed from his body.

Around him were eight corpses. All of it had only taken a matter of seconds, with him killing them without a sound.

He swung his right arm.

He shook off the spurts of his opponents' blood. Nevertheless, the blood-red colour of his arm wouldn't come off.

His crimson arm dyed in blood.

"....."

Then, that red-haired demon turned around.

The one whose name once roared within Roland, Crimson Fingered Claugh turned around.

And he looked this way.

With sharp eyes.

Glaring this way with bright red eyes as if they were burning,

"....."

However, he said nothing. Instead, his killing intent merely swelled up.

Eyewitnesses were to be killed.

It seemed that he was following that sort of order.

The demon moved to kill him.

His movements were unbelievably quick.

One step.

Two steps.

With the three steps, the distance between them was none.

Claugh raised his right arm. He raised his arm that had become bright red with the blood of the nobles he killed. And that arm moved to thrust towards the nape of his neck.

However, before then,

"... Before you kill me, please hear me out, Claugh Klom,"

He said—

Sion Astal said.

However, Claugh didn't stop. Firmly grabbing Sion's neck,

"... I don't need to. I already have permission to kill you."

"In that case, you'll kill me?"

"Yeah."

"Then do it."

"No problem. Die."

As Claugh said that, he began to crush Sion's neck.

It was as if he was grasping his life.

Sion had no way of defending himself.

No, right now in the Roland Empire, there was likely no one who could match Claugh's movements.

But at that, Sion laughed.

Over the feeling of his own death, he laughed.

After all, everything up until now had gotten according to his predictions.

And it'll be my victory from here, he thought.

Against this Crimson Fingered Claugh.

To lure the red-haired demon from Rahel Miller's side and tempt him over to his side was what he intended to bargain with from here.

"....."

His neck was tightened.

Like that, it was being strangled with enough pressure to tear it off.

Overwhelming death was approaching.

But nevertheless, Sion laughed. A frivolous laugh.

Regarding that,

"What's so funny?"

Though Claugh asked that with a dubious expression, Sion didn't look at him.

He didn't look at Claugh, or at his impending death.

What he was looking at right now as the figure of an angel.

In order to call over that angel, he snapped his fingers.

It was the signal that had been decided on beforehand.

Snap.

He sounded that out with his fingers.

"....."

There was the quiet sound of something cutting through wind.

And suddenly, behind Claugh, a sole girl appeared.

An abnormally beautiful girl around the age of fourteen or fifteen.

Long blonde hair, ceramic-like skin. She wore a white dougi around her flexible body, and in her left hand she held a skewer of dango, and in her right hand, she held a long sword that didn't look as if it could be handled by her delicate body.

The tip of that sword touched the back of Claugh's neck.

Though Claugh immediately tried to look behind him at that—

"Don't move. I'll kill you,"

The girl spoke in a cold voice completely devoid of emotion. Immediately following that, an overwhelming amount of

killing intent burst from her body. On top of that, the tip of her sword truly began to dig into Claugh's neck.

"....."

With that, Claugh became motionless. His expression becoming slightly tense, before it became oddly cheerful, as he looked down at Sion with a face like he was experiencing some kind of thrill.

"... Bastard..."

He began, but he didn't finish that sentence.

"Ferris,"

Sion said, to which the sword started cutting into Claugh's neck more deeply.

Like that, Claugh stopped.

After confirming that,

"... Be quiet. Right now, it's my turn to talk, isn't it?"

Sion said.

Glaring his way,

"... Don't make fun of me, brat. This level of..."

Claugh began, but then, immediately, again,

"Ferris,"

Sion ordered.

The sword continued to stab in more deeply. It was starting to become a considerably deep wound. If the sword were to cut in any more, Claugh's life would end, most likely.

At that, this time, Claugh definitely stopped moving.



Looking at that, Sion resumed.

"Just hurry up and be quiet, Claugh Klom."



Claugh glared at him.

With red eyes, he glared at him.

There was sharp hatred. Sharp killing intent. It was as if that gaze alone had enough to pressure to kill.

But again, at that, a smile arose in Sion's face.

With a monster before his eyes, a smile arose in his face.

After all, everything would begin from here.

After all, this Claugh Klom woul surely surrender, and everything would begin.

The beginning of everything.

The beginning of change.

The beginning of the revolution.

Sion grabbed Claugh's arm. He grabbed the arm of the monster strangling his neck.

And he spoke.

"Now then..."

To the misunderstanding genius who was completely dancing in the palm of his hand.

To the misunderstanding monster who wasn't supposed to lose to anyone.

And towards the country that had yet to need his own self.

"Shall we have my scenario begin now?"

Sion Astal declared.

Translator's Notes[\[edit\]](#)

1. ↑ Baby here is written using the kanji for *red*, hence the connection to Claugh's hair.
2. ↑ Luke, as a child, referred to himself with the informal and unassertive *boku* pronoun. As a teenager and onward, Luke uses the more polite and formal *watashi*.